

Book Review, for *The Mariner's Mirror*:

**Jonathan Parkinson, *The Royal Navy, China Station: 1861-1941***

**(Jonathan Parkinson, Matador/Troubador Publishing, Ltd., 2018)**

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Subtitled 'A History as seen through the careers of the Commanders in Chief', this important new work notes that it was not until April 1864 that China was noted for the first time as a separate station from its prior connection to East India. By then Britain had fought and won its two 'Opium' wars against imperial China, while tensions with isolationist Japan had broken out the year before over control of the Shimonoseki Straits, with British warships also bombarding Kagoshima (August 1863).

Parkinson has consulted a range of primary sources including Admiralty (ADM) and Foreign Office (FO) series at the UK National Archives (Kew) and various personal papers around Britain and abroad. His research cannot be considered comprehensive; some locations are missed such as Admiral of the Fleet Sir Henry Keppel's China Station-journals, held at the Caird Library (National Maritime Museum, Greenwich), although those of Vice Admiral Sir Cyprian Arthur George Bridge, for example, have been utilised. But this volume spans the China Station-services of some thirty-nine British admirals over four score years; an ambitious undertaking indeed.

The question then is whether this History is more than the sum of its parts? The work is crammed with information and the author is clearly knowledgeable. Yet it offers very little in terms of analytical narrative; of a larger story and lessons learned. The author's introduction is a few explanatory paragraphs and there is no concluding chapter or remarks. Works like *British Ships in China Seas: 1700 to the Present Day* (Liverpool University Press, 2004), Ulrike Hilleman's *Asian Empire and British Knowledge* (Palgrave Macmillan 2009), or even Fred G. Notehelfer's edited 1859-1866 journal of American businessman Francis Hall (Princeton University Press, 1992), by contrast, vividly describe Western commerce's invasion of the Far East. 'She comes with her sword and cannon, and her resonant fife and drum fill the quiet air of these isles,' observed Hall of Britain in 1863. 'She comes with her virtues and vices, and it will take the Eternal Accountant at last to decide whether "the opening of Japan" brings civilization to a fearful debit or a glorious credit in the books of the Ages.' Parkinson's own contribution is almost painfully soft-spoken on this account.

But he is not averse to quietly observe, for one, that Rear Admiral Sir Augustus Leopold Kuper's successor in 1865, Vice Admiral George St. Vincent King, helped turn Hong Kong into 'a convenient and safe place in which to do business, and under laissez-faire conditions' (35); this during the climax of the Taiping Rebellion. In a memo to H. M. Ships on station in May 1927, Vice Admiral Sir Reginald Yorke Tyrwhitt warned his men not exacerbate the Chinese Civil War which erupted with Chiang Kai-shek's communist insurgency with 'retaliatory actions' which could backfire, since the 'expenditure of a large amount of ammunition with indifferent results...tends to diminish the moral effect of such gunfire and may encourage the Chinese to go to greater lengths' (369). And in an endnote to the chapter devoted to Acting Admiral Sir Tom Spencer Vaughan Phillips, Parkinson suggests that Force 'Z' in December 1941 would not have benefited with the addition of the new Illustrious-class

aircraft carrier HMS *Indomitable* after all, given her inexperienced aircrews and antiquated planes at the time. The C-in-C of the China Station, perhaps too confident in shipboard anti-aircraft fire, went down with his flagship, *Prince of Wales*. As such, this book does help illuminate how during these years of 'Progress' and globalisation on the one hand, and political and social upheaval on the other, the Royal Navy's role on this station was as a proverbial eye in the hurricane, and at other times (and to other peoples) the hurricane itself.

Matador is the self-publishing branch of Troubador Publishing, Ltd., based in Leicester. Although many of this books maps and illustrations are not of best reprographic quality, and the layout and format of the work is curious in places, *The Royal Navy, China Station* fulfils its objective of being a valuable contribution to our wider understanding as well as a useful reference volume for researchers.

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